

## **The Power of Partnerships: How to Create Meaningful Connections with Parents**

### **Front Porch Series Broadcast Calls**

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Joining with Dr. Sheridan for the question and answer portion of today's broadcast call will be Dr. Brandy Clarke, also from the University of Nebraska. We are delighted to have her as a Front Porch speaker, and it is my pleasure to turn the mic over to Dr. Sue Sheridan.

Dr. Sue Sheridan: Thank you very much. I am very happy to be here, and I'll speak on behalf of Brandy as well. We are really looking forward to the opportunity to chat with you for the next 45 minutes or so.

Now, as Gail alluded, the new Head Start Framework provides an important guide for how to think about families and family participation and engagement. Although I wasn't part of the work or the development team that constructed that document, there is really complete synchrony in how I'll be talking about family engagement and the Framework's philosophy and practices. One thing I was very excited to see in this Framework is the whole orientation toward relationships – positive and goal-oriented relationships that really undergird all of the Framework's perspective.

In particular, the things that I'll be talking about are very consistent with the program foundations aspect of the Framework as well as the program impact areas. They describe -- these two components describe the processes that we have control over. Beyond that, the Framework also talks about outcomes at the family level and the child level. In fact, that's the real purpose of parent engagement and family engagement and engaged partnerships. We have very good research data, including a lot of research that's being conducted here at Nebraska, to confirm that, with a solid foundation and the right impact areas, we will see very positive outcomes for kids and families.

So, the main presentation that I'll be giving today is titled "The Power of Partnerships: How to Create Meaningful Connections with Parents." I would like to acknowledge at the outset the wonderful staff, post-docs, and graduate students who assisted in the development of this presentation. As we've already talked about, Brandy Clarke will be joining me later today as we go through some of the Q&A that people raise throughout the presentation. Dr. Kristin Rispoli and Tara Sjuts and Mike Coutts have always -- also been very instrumental in helping us think about this Framework.

Now, there are many ways that families support education. One very typical way you might think about is – is exemplified by Calvin, one of my favorites, who calls his dad while he's at work and says, "Hi, Dad. It's me, Calvin." And of course, Dad gets very worried. We've all been there, right? "Oh, you're supposed to be at school. Are you all right? What's the matter? Why are you calling?" And Calvin chimes in and says, "I'm fine. I told the teacher I had to go to the bathroom. Quick, what's 11+7?" Billy, part of the Family Circus cartoon, also has many examples throughout time that exemplify other approaches to family involvement. Here he asks his mom to fax his homework right over -- when she finds it, of course.

Of course, there are some things that parents do that are not terribly helpful. Here's an example of a little boy sitting in the corner reading a book and looks at his father, who's watching television, and says, "Dad, can you read?" It's a good example of the fact that we are always modeling something for children; so keep that in mind. And finally -- I know I've been here before -- this dad approaches his children and says, "Your mother and I are feeling quite overwhelmed. You'll have to bring yourselves up." But it's still the fact that all of these families have strengths. They all want to do what's best for their child. With the right approach, the right attitudes, and the right atmosphere, we can work together to identify helpful actions with families to help children achieve.

Head Start and Early Head Start is really all about preparing children to be ready to enter school. So, I'll talk a little bit about traditional conceptions of school readiness. Traditionally, we think about school readiness with a focus on the young child's competencies at the time that they enter school. That's somewhere around age five or six.

Traditional conceptions emphasize the capacities that children must be developing so that they are "ready" to participate in formal schooling; for example, early literacy skills such as letter recognition or alphabet knowledge. It's a philosophy where instruction occurs from the teacher and is directed toward the child. The educational program then is responsible for making decisions and delivering effective interventions and curricula.

But it is the fact that "parents take their child home after professionals complete their services; parents continue to provide the care for the larger portion of the child's waking hours. And no matter how skilled professionals are or how loving parents might be, each cannot achieve alone what the two parties, working hand-in-hand, can accomplish together." This quote is almost 25 years old. Almost a quarter-century ago we've been talking about this, yet it still rings true today.

The newer conceptions then of school readiness conceptualize getting ready for school in terms of relationships among the child, the family, and the caregiving community, and their interactions with one another. So the focus is not only on promoting child skills and abilities for school success, but also on enhancing parents readiness to engage in their child's lifetime of learning and really developing a curriculum of the home.

This is not my term, but it's one that I like a lot. It really talks about parental skills and competencies, things that parents do to provide stimulation in the home, and preparedness and provision of natural learning opportunities in all kinds of out-of-school contexts.

The focus in new conceptions of school readiness is much more on family-school partnerships; and they're couched in a family strength approach whereby family strengths, cultures, and realities help shape intervention effects. You'll hear terms such as "parent involvement," "parent engagement," "family-school partnership," "parent participation" -- all kinds of different terms that -- that might be used synonymously. Is it semantics, or is there some substance to these different terms? I would like to propose that, in fact, these terms are not synonymous. They're all very important, but they're very different conceptually and practically. They convey very different priorities in how we approach our work with families.

Parent involvement tends to promote a task of the schools being responsible for involving parents. It is the job of teachers, for example, to get parents to participate in the classroom, to come to school events, maybe to do some things at home that are good for the child, such as reading to the child or -- or talking about numeracy concepts. All of these are very good things and very important things, but it's very one-directional. It -- it moves from the school to the home in a very prescriptive approach. It retains the responsibility for coming up with activities for parents to be involved on the school or on the teacher.

Parent engagement is a little broader. Parent engagement concerns things that parents do in many settings in ways that support their child's development. They're engaged with their child and they seek out ways to help them learn and grow. The focus on parent engagement is on the relationship between the parent and the child with the desired outcome being the child's healthy development, learning, and other positive readiness outcomes. I'm very pleased to see the Head Start Framework describe a focus on family engagement. This sends a very important message that it's more than just involving parents in a way that they participate somehow but they really become very engaged with their children and -- and -- and child goals.

I'll actually take it a step further and suggest that we think about parents as partners. In a family-school partnership approach, all of the work that we do with parents and families is as partners in their child's learning. The emphasis, as you'll see, is on the co-construction, or joint construction, of goals and methods to support child development. The focus is on what both schools and families want for the child and a mutual and shared responsibility for getting there.

So newer conceptions of school readiness then consider families as partners in -- not necessarily recipients of -- educational services. Parents and teachers together must be ready to encourage ongoing stimulation, promote positive development, ensure consistent supports across home and school, and develop positive relationships. It is, in fact, a shared responsibility. There's a lot of research findings around the importance of collaborative partnerships between parents and professionals. Research is finding that this kind of an approach helps -- helps children transition very easily and seamlessly across

systems. And they're related to -- family-school partnerships are related to and -- and actually produce some positive, important gains in language and literacy skills and social-emotional and behavioral outcomes for children.

So it's not just that family participation or family-school partnerships are related to positive things in a co-relational kind of way, but they actually produce important outcomes for children. Some of our research, for example, has set up different approaches to working across home and school. We've trained and supported teachers in collaborating and partnering with teachers. We've measured what it is that they do and what the outcomes are, and we've compared different approaches.

In fact, the family-school partnership approach focusing on relationships between families and schools and the joint and shared responsibility produces superior school readiness outcomes for Head Start and Early Head Start parents and children. And we're also finding that a positive parent-teacher relationship is actually partly responsible for the benefits that we see in children. There can be actions and practices that encourage parents and teachers to work in tandem with one another, but some of our recent research is finding that it's through healthy, positive relationships that these actions take hold. This is a very important finding. It's not just a nice thing then to work as partners. It's not just a nice thing to create a positive relationship with parents. It's at least partly responsible for the positive outcomes that we're seeing.

Some other research is finding that it's the school that really makes the difference in ensuring that families engage as partners. School factors that are relational in nature -- things like being very welcoming, respecting, and -- and creating opportunities for connecting between home and school -- have a major impact on parents' engagement. It's what the school does that predicts whether parents will be meaningfully connected or if they'll just be tangentially involved. And also consistent with the Head Start Framework is the importance of leadership at the program or systems level, these foundational aspects that are necessary for effective partnerships, including things like ongoing program assessment, which we'll talk about in a little while, and professional development. All of these are very essential to ensure that the right kinds of conditions are put into place. How do we get there?

Well, I'll present a framework for working with families; and I actually used the term framework for a long time. It's not identical to what came out in the Head Start documents, but I chose not to change that term today because I think it really captures the notion that this must really be a frame for how we go about doing business. Again, although the framework that I'll be talking about is not identical to the Head Start Framework, it is completely consistent with it. The framework that I will be talking about is characterized in terms of 5 A's: approach, attitude, atmosphere, actions, and achievement. And it looks something like this. The 5 A's really lead to these pathways to partnerships.

I'll start over here with the left-hand side, where we see approach, attitude, and atmosphere. These three A's along the left column are what we consider prerequisites to everything else. These three A's really must be in place in order for the actions to be acceptable and effective in practice. You really can't overlook the importance of these prerequisites as essential components to establishing partnerships.

Without them, the actions that you might try to deliver will be very short-lived. And I actually prefer the word "actions" over "activities." We need to be very careful to not simply espouse activities with parents. This leads to sort of a checklist orientation where we identify things to do with parents rather than an entire approach for engaging and partnering with parents.

So, let's start by talking about approach. Approach concerns how we approach our work with families. Do we approach our work with parents as though we are the experts and parents are the recipients or consumers of our expertise? Do we think we need to train parents, perhaps, because they are doing something wrong or somehow insufficient? I mean, I think you can see when I phrase it that way that this approach can really quickly lead to judgment. Now, it is true that some -- in fact, probably most parents really do want help and suggestions; and that's all within the -- the realm of partnerships. But it's the how and the why we do what we do that's more important in a true partnership.

What do we mean by partnership? Well, in a textbook kind of way, it's a relationship involving close cooperation between parties that have clearly specified roles and responsibilities. Importantly, it's a student-centered philosophy. It's all about the student. The student is at the center. And with the goal of enhancing success and -- and promoting positive outcomes and experiences for children.

The approach that we are proposing for the entire system, starting with leadership and administration, is on families as partners. Efforts cannot occur in isolation or in a vacuum. The partnership approach really must be infused in all that is done at the home, classroom, program, and system levels -- very consistent here with the program foundations of the Head Start Framework. With partnerships, there's shared responsibility for educating and socializing children. Both families and educators are essential for children's growth and development inside and out of school. And, the emphasis is on relationships rather than separate roles.

The question is not what should we do to involve parents, but rather, how can families and educators work together to promote the academic and social-emotional development of students? If we approach our work in a piecemeal way -- for example, we have one issue and we come up with one solution, we have another issue and come up with yet another idea -- the result will be a set of activities that are inefficient and -- and very costly in -- in terms of time and energy. So the emphasis is really on changing the interface between home and school to support students as learners, not merely to get parents involved in an activity or arrive at one solution, for example, for some kind of an issue or concern. A partnership approach will go nowhere, though, if the attitudes of administrators, staff, teachers, and parents frankly don't convey the belief that working together in collaboration with one another is the best way of doing business.

Attitudes include the underlying beliefs about children and families: their values, their practices, and their culture. They permeate everything. It's very hard to deliver something honestly if you don't genuinely believe it. It's very hard to be -- it's very hard to practice as a true partner if you don't have the attitude or belief system that parents are essential players in children's education.

Some of the attitudes that are necessary for effective partnerships... First, we must convey the belief that all families have strengths. They are essential and they are competent. Parents can help their children succeed in school; we have to believe that. Some might need to be provided with the opportunity and – and some information and support to do so, but all parents can be a true asset for their child's future. Another important attitude is that parents and educators bring unique and important perspectives and expertise to the table, and they do it as co-equals. There's no room for blame. No one's at fault when we're talking about partnerships. If a child is not succeeding, it's the partnership really that hasn't been utilized to its full potential.

The next A is atmosphere. This is the environment piece of the Head Start Framework. The physical atmosphere is often the focus of programs' efforts to "involve parents." This includes things like having creative bulletin boards, signs around the classroom or the program offices or buildings in native languages of some of your families, pictures of various cultures or family events. And these are all very important things to do, but really they only go so far. They will be short-lived unless they're integrated into an approach and there are clear attitudes, just as we discussed.

The affective climate is just as important as the physical climate. In fact, in many ways, even more important. The affective climate in interactions with families are also part of the atmosphere. They're characterized by feelings of trust, respect, openness, opportunities for communication. These kinds of affective overtures can set parents and children at ease. If they're done wrong, they can create discomfort or uneasiness among family members. Essentially, all families must feel welcome. Differences in parent backgrounds and experiences really are strengths, and they can be recognized as such. Putting it all together into actions, it's very much about communication. All interactions, all actions with families really should be reflective, collaborative, playful, partnership-oriented, and focused on relationships.

We'll lay all this out in just a minute, but as I prefaced it, it is the case that when it comes to actions, it really is very much about communication. Indeed, the most salient and obvious interactions that we have with families occur through communications. All kinds of communications occur with family members. They occur when you meet face-to-face and have conversations with parents at drop-off and pick-up times. They might occur through interactions that you have when parents come into the classroom or attend a school event, when they come in for meetings or conferences, when you go to homes and do home visits. Each and every exchange that you have with parents sets a tone and carries meaning.

Communication can be verbal or nonverbal, in fact. It is the case that a great deal of the communication that takes place between people occurs in the nonverbal realm. This is why it's so important to think about how interactions occur with families and not just what is said or what they're about. Parents need to know that we care before they care what we know. Effective communication is the foundation for partnerships. It's really important -- it is necessary to share information between home and school, to establish goals, to share expectations, to help parents and teachers understand each other's

perspectives, to avoid misunderstandings. How much happens -- how much communication happens, the content of what it is that's communicated, and the tone of the messages are all very important.

Essentially, communications from educators to all families should really communicate three consistent themes: one, we really want to develop a partnership with them; secondly, their input is critically important; and third, when problems do arise -- and they will -- we must work together. It's really critical that in the face of adversity or challenge, you commit to working as partners to solve it. These three themes -- we really want to develop a partnership, input is critically important, and we need to continue to work together no matter what -- is really the crux of the kinds of communications and messages that you want to convey to families. It will be much easier and more effective to communicate under all conditions if you really stay focused on your shared goals, what you both want; and that's what's best for the child.

I won't go through a lot of guidelines for communication. In fact, there are some handouts that were provided along with this presentation today, and they -- the links to these handouts are going to be available I think through the chat function on the -- on the website. So you -- if you haven't downloaded them yet, you might want to take a look at them now. Essentially, the guidelines for communication really stay focused on a positive orientation, two-way communication, and information sharing across both formal and informal methods. All communications, though, are underscored with the importance of a shared responsibility for student success.

Part of the Head Start Framework and the framework that we use here is ongoing self-assessment. The 5 A's Framework offers a process by which programs can identify the most appropriate and effective actions for growing parent partnerships. Growing partnerships is in fact a process. It's not an activity. It would be very haphazard, I think, to simply begin at the point of selecting activities. It's much more strategic, planful, and thoughtful to approach it in a way that is really intended to be in place for the long haul.

There's a handout entitled "Program Self-Evaluation: Approach, Attitudes, Atmosphere, and Actions for Family-School Partnerships." So if you have that handout packet, you'll see a form that looks something like this. This is at least part of it. Selective sections ask program staff to reflect on communications, beliefs, cultural awareness, invitations to parents, among other things. So here's a snapshot of some of the items from the communications section of the self-assessment form. We also have just a snapshot of a couple other sections: cultural awareness, invitations to parents. Essentially, what we encourage you to do is to self-reflect, to -- to take a look at these items, to have your staff do the same, and determine how effectively you or your program are engaging in these objectives that are really geared towards some of the fundamental characteristics and elements of positive family-school partnerships.

Once your staff provides input, once you have a chance to take a look and -- and really self-reflect, you'll be in a position to collectively -- and ideally, with parents even -- specify your partnership goals. What do you want to see happen for the families and children in your program? Identify what you're already

doing well and determine one area that you really want to focus on. You might select, for example, conveying cultural sensitivity. You might select an area with many ones and twos, areas that need some attention, where there's areas for growth, but use some of your strength areas to help achieve your goals. Specify the steps and procedures that are necessary to help you get there.

Create a plan for implementation. Once you identify the steps that you'll go through and how you'll work toward achieving these partnership objectives and goals, determine a specific road map for getting there, including what, who, how, and when. And always use the opportunity to evaluate your progress toward family engagement goals as well as outcomes for students in your program. This is the strategic, planful, formative process that will help you really create an approach for the long haul.

One other action that I think is very important because it's an opportunity that all Head Start programs have is the work of home visits and what happens during the home visits. Home visits are things that most Head Start programs and teachers do. And although elements of home visits might vary in terms of frequency or length, for example, they do certainly provide an excellent opportunity for communicating meaningfully with parents, for developing positive and healthy relationships, for building partnerships as we're talking about them, for really collaborating with parents to meet important developmental goals for children.

Of course, we're promoting a partnership-centered home visit approach with collaborative planning in place to achieve these shared goals. In partnership-centered home visits, the emphasis is on the parent-child dyad, what parents can do in the home to engage their child in ongoing learning opportunities. It's supported by a parent-professional partnership, but the professional's role is very unique here, and it's one of support, not an instructor. This kind of an approach results in parents' control and responsibility for children's learning within and especially outside of home visits, with the idea being creating this opportunity to strengthen the parent-child dyad, the skills and strategies that the parents are using, so that they can continue engaging with their child well after you leave.

Parent -- I'm sorry -- partnership-centered home visits are structured utilizing a collaborative planning framework. In a collaborative planning framework, we always start with child strengths. We always start with where the child is at, what he or she is doing well. And the process is then one that helps him or her get to the next level or get to the next goal by moving very systematically, thoughtfully, and planfully together. We identify not only the child's strengths but also an area where the child can benefit in terms of preparing them for school.

Parents and teachers share observations of the child across the settings in which they're responsible, the home and the school. For example, observations that a parent and teachers might have could identify a child's difficulty recognizing colors or shapes. There might be some challenges that the child experiences around transition times or following a routine, or any host of cognitive or social-emotional behavioral needs that would be important for the child to transition to school.



Parents and teachers work together to develop appropriate goals in this particular target area. Together they identify natural opportunities where parents and teachers can support the development of the particular skill that they're focusing on. They will identify targeted strategies to infuse into natural learning situations. For example, a parent and teacher together might identify ways to set up situations to play with shapes or explore colors or structure interactions with a child to help him or her learn to manage transitions. Whatever that target area is, the parent and teacher together will identify strategies that can be used in their own respective setting.

As – as an early childhood provider, you can spend time in the – in the home visit observing the parent interacting with his or her child. They could be practicing the strategy. Your role then is to support the parents' development of skills in using strategies. Provide suggestions as necessary rather than doing it yourself. Really scaffold the parents' skill development as they continue to work with their child. Develop a coordinated plan for using these strategies across a home and school outside of the home visit. Coordination, collaboration, consistency between home and school are really key elements of these important strategies. Over time and through continued observations, including through some data collection and information sharing, parents and teachers continue to monitor improvements in the target areas; and as the child achieves various goals and objectives, new goals and opportunities are identified in a very systematic, very recursive way.

Also in the packet of handouts are copies of the Collaborative Home Visit Guide that we use. And you can see in this process very much how the focus is on a partnership, starting with a child's strengths, using observations that occur across home and school since the last visit to identify where the child is at, his or her strengths and areas of need. And then also, how, through observation during the home visit, the provider can set the stage for the parent and child to continue to work together with a provider providing support, assistance, and even, you know, helping and modeling as appropriate and necessary, but really turning it back over to the parent, who will be the primary interactor with the child.

It's very much about the parent-child and parent-professional relationships. Home visits conducted in this way really support parents' natural and ongoing efforts to support their child's learning. The provider is there as an aide and as somebody that can support and, as I said, scaffold parents' skill development. But ultimately, it really is about turning it over and having the parent be a primary caregiver in their child's learning.

In a nutshell, that really provides the context for the work that we are doing around engaging families in a partnership orientation. And I will have the handouts and the PowerPoint presentation available on our website; and you're free to contact myself or colleagues here at Nebraska for more information on how we can go about continuing to promote this kind of orientation. So I thank you very much, and I look forward to questions.